

Black on Black

By Judith Crist

After movie-buff debates about the small that movie has made, the answer is not only yes but with heated argument about the merits of Eisenstein or all cinematic blessings come, are in that cut-up the pea patch and often then not in left in their teeth. Theater loudly proclaim which of the hour, the south alone the year, crossing left and right and passing left and there.

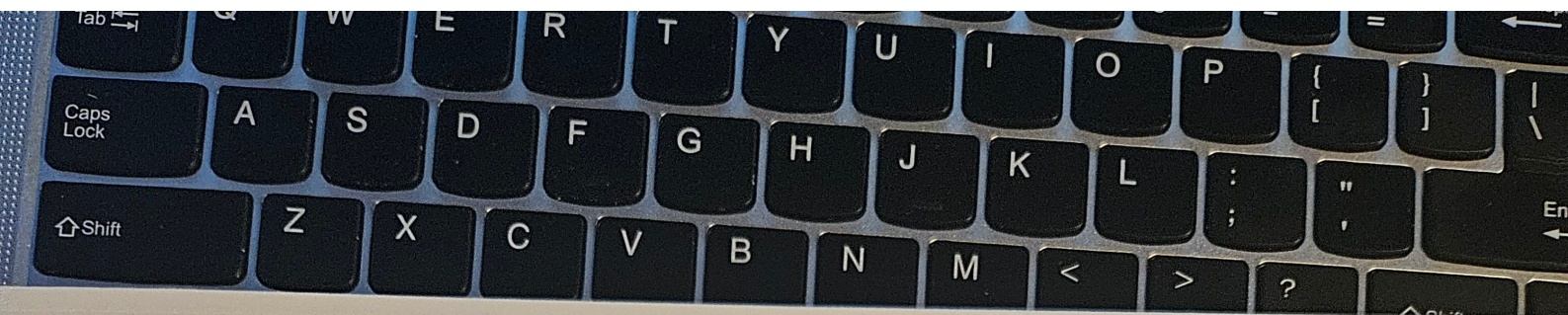
of a Three-Day Pass a mark movie if you will; a charming "little" film, warm and warmish and it is about a G.I. who gets a three-day pass for, heads for Paris, goes to, and finally finds a girl in the museum for the last day. The G.I. happens the girl is black. The movie is a perfect example of the kind of film that is not so much about only

and was an ex-Air Force man who tried to get studio work. So by lunch and snack and lunch shop, he made his first feature work in which the director's hand, distinctive style and are clearly presented.

The film is marked, above all, by the G.I., beautiful Harry Bard, brave and aware of his own distinct white establishment is a prowess-futuristic and a girl, the late Nicole is killed in a car crash two

ing the film), who bears a blance to Annie Girardot, open-faced and lovely in close. The two are intense and complicated, above all, that both their emotions are in a way. But what else—and Mr. Van Dine is the director's star eye and red his mother from the "old" with complex shoulders, the ground that he was the father of the study in-governing.

John Van Dine had to go all the way to France to make *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* because he is an American Negro. He had made three fine film shorts while struggling to survive on the West



“‘Three-Day Pass’, we note to our shame, is only the second film in recent years that deals with a Negro primarily as a human.”

One of the meatier movie-buff debate topics concerns the stuff that movie history is made on. Who among us has not whiled the talk away with heated argument on whether it is Griffith or Eisenstein or Welles from whom all cinematic blessings flow? Critics, of course, are in that catbird seat, tearing up the pea patch and winding up more often than not in left field with prunes in their teeth, Thurber fashion, as they loudly proclaim which work is the “best” of the hour, the month or the moment, let alone the year, erecting movie milestones left and right and pausing to note a landmark here and there.

Call *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* a milestone or landmark-movie if you will; primarily see it as a charming “little” film, brimming with humor and warmth and bittersweet truth. It is about a G.I. stationed in France who gets a three-day pass for “good” behavior, heads for Paris, goes the loneliness route, accidentally meets a girl and off they go to the seashore for the weekend . . . ah, but stay. The G.I. happens to be black, and the girl is white. The “happens” is what gives particular distinction to Melvin Van Peebles’ film. For it is—we should note to our shame—only

that deals in human terms with a human experience that is intensified and complicated by race. The first, *Nothing But a Man*, made four years ago by two documentarians, dealt with a young man forced to face the issues he had hitherto avoided, of accepting the responsibilities of a family and a home as a man and, by establishing that home in the South, as a Negro. When that independent low-budget film was released in 1964, we could accuse the Hollywood establishment, and did, of pointing a *Pinky* at the Negro and keeping a stiff upper-lipped silence on an issue that had preoccupied not only the nation but the world. And four years later, of course, the Oscar ceremonies found Hollywood congratulating itself on having *In the Heat of the Night* and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* among its five best-film nominees and there is indeed small doubt that the Noble Negro is now an established Hollywood cliché. And that, it would seem, is as far as Hollywood can go.

Melvin Van Peebles had to go all the way to France to make *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* because he is an American Negro. He had made three fine film shorts while struggling to survive on the West

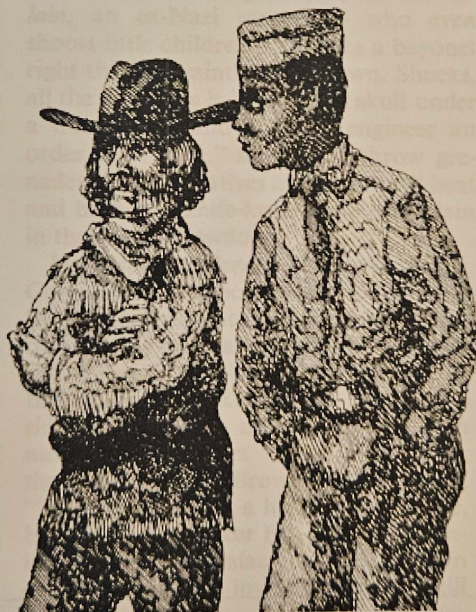
and was an ex-Air Force officer) when he tried to get studio work. So ten years later, by hook and crook and finagling and friendship, he made his first feature, an *auteur* work in which the director-writer’s firm hand, distinctive style and cinematic gifts are clearly presented.

The film is marked, above all, by delicacy. The G.I., beautifully portrayed by Harry Baird, brims with self-mockery, aware of his own dichotomy as far as the white establishment is concerned, full of prowess-fantasies and high spirits. The girl, the late Nicole Berger (tragically killed in a car crash two days after finishing the film), who bears a striking resemblance to Annie Girardot, is sweet and open-faced and lovely in her comprehensions. The two are universal in their youth and complexities; above all, the ironies that beset their relationship sparkle with satiric humor. But what is most remarkable—and Mr. Van Peebles’ distinction—is the director’s clear eye upon the black man and his various facets, the Ray Charles “bit” with sun-glasses and shifting shoulders, the grounded supersensitivities; he sees the failings and the fallibilities, the stuffy do-goodings, the basic bigot-

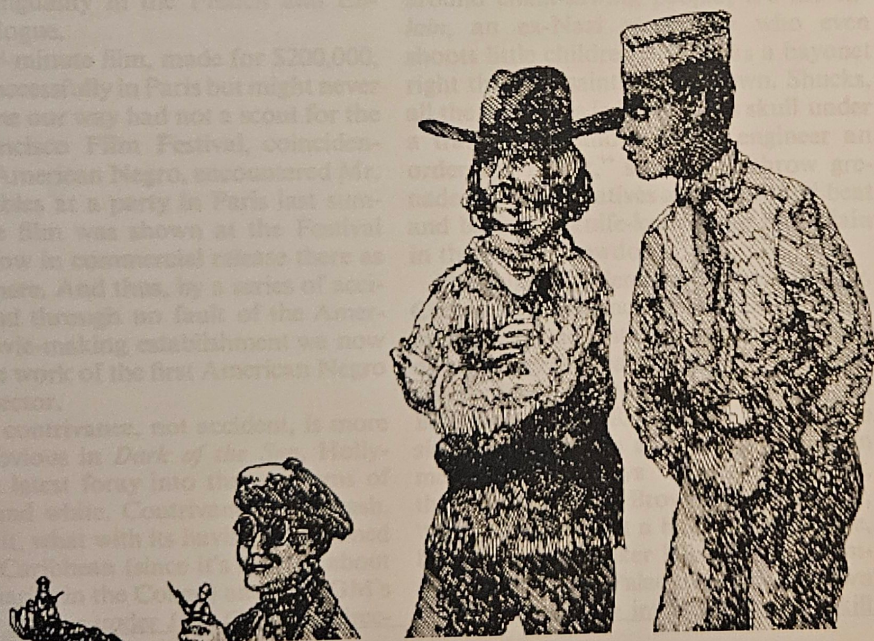
the second feature film of quality to have come our way in recent years that is concerned with a Negro primarily as a man,

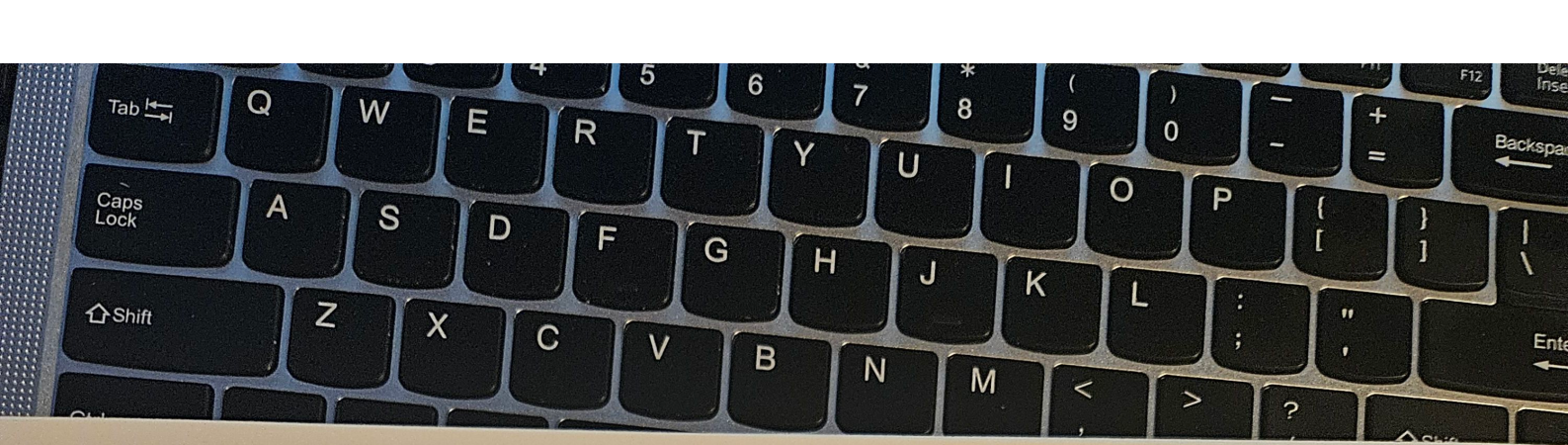
Coast, but he was offered only broom-and-mop jobs (apologetically, of course, since he did have a B.A. from Ohio Wesleyan

ries—in short, the humanity. Thus there is the bittersweetness—not the bitter or the sweet, just the tang that emphasizes the



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truth. Most important—for it is as a film maker that we hail Mr. Van Peebles—are the cinematic aspects of his work, the choreography of the camera (a cabaret sequence achieves a ballet-like quality as the field is surveyed by the male on the prowl), the brilliant sharp cut (for once we see how a driver keeping his eye on the road sees his seat-mate), the succinct editing, the unique handling of the couple's bilinguality in the French and English dialogue.

The 87-minute film, made for \$200,000, played successfully in Paris but might never have come our way had not a scout for the San Francisco Film Festival, coincidentally an American Negro, encountered Mr. Van Peebles at a party in Paris last summer; the film was shown at the Festival and is now in commercial release there as well as here. And thus, by a series of accidents and through no fault of the American movie-making establishment we now have the work of the first American Negro film director.

Pure contrivance, not accident, is more than obvious in *Dark of the Sun*, Hollywood's latest foray into the problems of black and white. Contrivance—and cash, lots of it, what with its having been filmed in the Caribbean (since it's a story about mercenaries in the Congo) and in MGM's British studios under Jack Cardiff's direc-

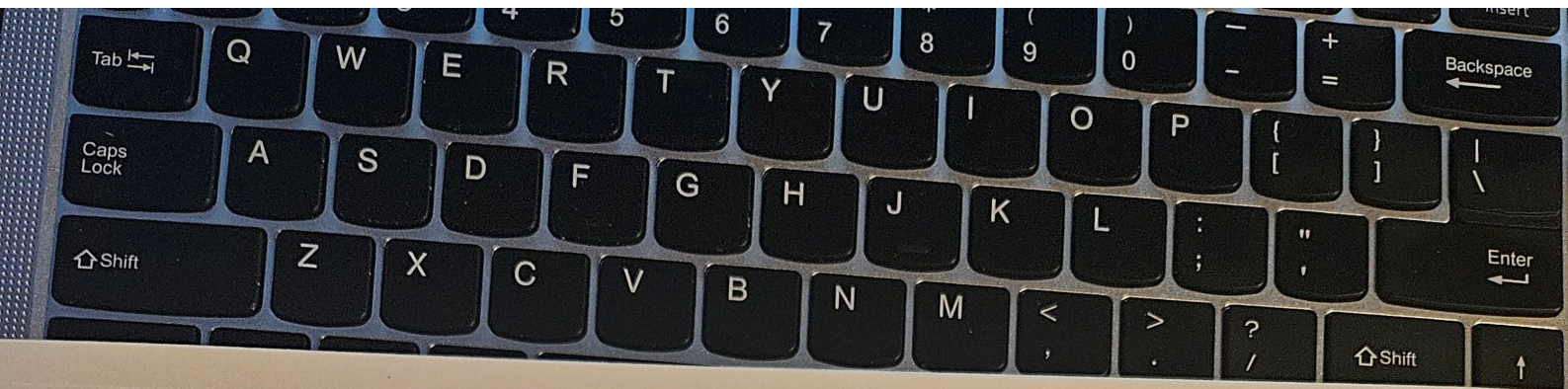
ten by Quentin Werty and Andrian Spies, who must be credited with leaving no cliché untouched or over-ripe phrase unused.

We won't go into the stomach-turning detailing of blood, gore and gut-spilling for which the Congolese war serves as excuse, except to correct the misimpression we reported here about an ad for the film last week. It's not the hero who goes around chain-sawing people; it's the villain, an ex-Nazi mercenary who even shoots little children and sticks a bayonet right through saintly Jim Brown. Shucks, all the hero does is jam a guy's skull under a train wheel and give the engineer an order to "roll it," shoot and throw grenades at unruly natives and batter and beat and bash and knife-knife-knife the villain in their final showdown.

No, skip the violence to the human body. Consider the violence done the intelligence by the stock adventure story given a gloss of topicality and particularly the social insult in the Noble Negro portrayed by Jim Brown, as heroic Rod Taylor's Congolese sidekick. Taylor is a clean-cut American mercenary who says "I'm a hired hand, that's all I know". Brown says to Taylor, "To you this is just a hunk of real estate, but to me it's Bunker Hill and the storming of the Winter Palace. . . . I came down out of the tree by invitation and I'll kill

the on-screen survivors nothing short of beatified. The off-screen reaction is little short of nausea.

Admittedly, expectations had scarcely been high for *Dark of the Sun* on the basis at least of the ads. (How long, in the light of his more recent work, will we keep reminding ourselves of Cardiff's beautiful camera work in *Black Narcissus* and his direction of *Sons and Lovers*?) And admittedly one knew pretty much what to expect with *Custer of the West*, a Cinerama made-in-Spain spectacle that was successful as a road-show in England. For showing here on standard-size screens some of the Cinerama effects have been shorn but the spectacle remains, and is briskly displayed under Robert Siodmak's direction. Beyond the familiar aspects of the legend, however, the Bernard Gordon-Julian Halevy script is oddly topical as well as literate and made more so by Robert Shaw's complex portrait of Custer, Mary Ure's subtlety as his wife, Lawrence Tierney's interesting Sheridan. Shaw's interpretation of Custer gives substance to both story and history and elevates the inevitable cavalry-vs.-Indians clichés. The result is an engrossing adventure film that puts the emphasis on character and, perhaps wisely, avoids putting the final word on an historical controversy. The winning point is performance—and for a lagniappe there's a



Theater/John Simon
**DON'T PLAY US
AT ALL**

"...Van Peebles's new play abandons hate for joy...this would appear laudable, but proves less appealing than its opposite..."

tion, with its cast including Rod Taylor, Yvette Mimieux, Jim Brown and Kenneth More, among others. Based on a novel by Wilbur A. Smith, the screenplay was writ-

anybody—Chinese, Russian, English, you—who tries to put me back up." Such nobility obviously can't survive; bayonet through pectorals, Brown has got to go—leaving

slightly more than cameo-sized bit by Robert Ryan that shows in miniature, as Shaw does throughout, just how the pros perform.

Illustration by chas b slackman

Pop

...of new wave running... Broadway. I was... and... about... a... of material, gratifying... and generally... Van... songs, fairly cleverly... with... movements devised by... Moore, pasted together and, without anything resembling a book, served up as a... When the Tony... comes along, this... grand... musical was nominated in every conceivable category, including one in-... Best Musical Comedy

...So far, so possible; we assume that we are heading for an animal fable with music, a genre that would be relatively new on Broadway, and might yield some whimsical, hortatory fun. But, presently, the two parts complain

...the gospel variety, as opposed to the... for... The music ranges from the... to the... Harold Wheeler's able... try valiantly to make silly parts out of... more suited to a row's ear.

But the greater disaster is the words, both book and lyrics. They turn the principal characters into... while leaving the... I shudder to think what would have been said of a white... had he portrayed blacks like this. The writ-